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Casey's Death Seals a Void

Committee Will Have to Judge His Role Largely on Hearsay

By GREGORY F. TREVERTON

The opening of the congressional investigation into the Iran-contras affair has provided no new sensational revelations, but has cast the whole episode into sharper perspective.

Yet the news of former CIA Director William Casey's death on Wednesday was somehow a fitting postscript to the opening of this investigation, for it reminds us that one of the great puzzles of the piece—Casey's own role—may never be fully resolved. Other participants, like Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, may emulate retired Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord in hinting that they saw Casey as the central character—a signal of license for their activities from someone close to the President.

Already the congressional investigations have corrected what was an inevitable distortion of the Tower Commission's report. Given the commission's charter, it focused narrowly on the arms sales to Iran and the diversion of profits to benefit the contras. Those arms sales, however disastrous, were a small piece of North's operations and thus of the story. The bigger part was finding other sources of funding for the contras. That much is now clear.

Casey's role, however, is not clear, and may never be. For months now there have been indications that he was central to the operation. For instance, when the congressional intelligence committees first limited covert assistance to the contras—to

\$24 million in the autumn of 1983—they also barred any resort to the CIA contingency fund. They did not, however, explicitly prohibit other executive branch officials, including those in the CIA, from seeking other sources of aid. In late 1983 and early 1984, as the \$24 million ran out, Casey apparently became the focal point in seeking that aid. He and other officials, including Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, approached governments that ranged from Israel to Brunei to Saudi Arabia, and quietly canvassed private sources in the United States, South Korea, Taiwan and Latin America. When the \$24 million authorized by Congress ran out in March, 1984, North became the informal coordinator of the private support. That October, when Congress barred any CIA involvement, the agency withdrew from its role. Whether Casey withdrew is less certain.

By the same token, Casey also seems central in selling arms to Iran. He clearly was an enthusiast for the original idea, and, by the Tower Commission's report, he encouraged North to take day-to-day control of the operation. Yet when North called on the CIA in November, 1985, to bail him out when he could find no aircraft to transship arms from Portugal to Iran, it was not Casey, but rather the CIA's deputy director, John McMahon, who said no more—not without a formal presidential authorization.

If we never know the full extent of Casey's role, it will not be just because he has died. It will also be because the operation, once brought into the White House, was run extremely loosely—reminiscent of the early postwar years of covert action, when CIA officers interpreted the winks and nods of their President in order to protect him, the exercise of the doctrine known then as "plausible denial."

Donald T. Regan, the President's former chief of staff, vividly if inadvertently be-

spoke the looseness. In denying knowledge of North's laundering of profits from arms sales to Iran, he likened their relationship to bank president and teller. Yet someone conducting his government's most sensitive covert operations hardly would seem to resemble a bank teller in relation to the official charged with protecting the President and his political future.

The looseness pervaded the entire episode. On that score, Secord's testimony is eloquent: "I . . . understood that this Administration knew of my contact and approved of it." Secretary of State George P. Shultz told the Senate last December that he registered his opposition to the sales in two full National Security Council meetings on the subject, but it was not even clear to him when, or if, decisions had been taken.

Regan, perhaps seeing his boss' anguish over the hostages, was a cheerleader for the arms sales. In this atmosphere North, hearing his President enthuse over the contras, could have connected the arms sales and the contras on his own. He adopted his own version of plausible denial, one long since discarded by the CIA and one that it was unwilling to countenance in this case, when McMahon instead insisted on clear authorization from the President.

Perhaps North's own testimony will shed light on the point. Yet, given the looseness in the White House, we may never know the precise trail of authorization, especially if North invokes his own version of the Casey defense. And that looseness is a large lesson of the affair, one drawn by the Tower Commission and already underscored by the congressional investigation.

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